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# John Sorensen, ed. *A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott*

Laura Visser-Maessen

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- 1 John Sorensen, ed. *A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott*
- 2 Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, Pp. 376. ISBN: 9780226209616.
- 3 Laura Visser-Maessen
- 4 Grace Abbott (1878-1939) and her sister Edith (1876-1957) belonged to the inner circle of a remarkable group of American middle-class women during the Progressive Era that included icons such as Jane Addams and Florence Kelley. In that capacity, the sisters "changed our nation more profoundly than have many presidents," John Sorensen argues in his introduction to *A Sister's Memories* (4), the unfinished memoirs Edith wrote about Grace, and now edited by Sorensen into a cohesive story for publication. A touch of hagiography aside, the book indeed makes a convincing case for recovering her legacy and embracing her as the trailblazing social engineer and the feminist role model she was.
- 5 Believing that the strength of democracies rested on their treatment of the most vulnerable, Grace relentlessly championed children's, immigrants', and women's rights. The academic Edith helped her with research, while the "more intuitive and pragmatic" Grace applied the necessary organizing skills, vision, and audacity (3). Together, they helped shape some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest landmarks in social work. Edith was instrumental in establishing social work as a profession and the academic training it required. As head of the Immigrants' Protective League (1908-21) and the U.S. Children's Bureau (1921-34), Grace affected millions of children and immigrants through her fights for child labor laws, health and maternity care, and financial aid for the poor in the U.S.

and beyond, as her work paved the way for UNICEF (2, 289-93). Along the way, the sisters shattered female behavioral norms. Grace became the first woman ever nominated for a presidential government post and the first person to represent the U.S. at a League of Nations committee (2). They also advanced new models for long-term social change, geared at the interrelation between various social ills. Grace's groundbreaking work in social data registration was pivotal in the enforcement of new social laws and in fact-checking government propaganda (198, 354). Moreover, despite identifying as Republican, they helped popularize intellectual justifications for rooting social policy in scientific research and federal supervision by casting them as a continuation of—rather than deviation from—American frontier values.

- 6 The publication of *A Sister's Memories* accordingly fits the renewed societal and academic interest in progressive social activism, as manifested in the Occupy and Trump resistance movements and in an ever-growing list of studies on social justice movements. These include a flurry of publications on the Progressive Era and its stalwarts in the last two decades. As such, the book will appeal to academics interested in American history and politics, social and reform movements, life writing, and women studies, as well as general readers and current social activists.
- 7 While the book traces Grace's life from childhood to death, it is no conventional memoir. Due to its many objectives, pinpointing the book's overarching genre or argument is difficult. Abbott began writing shortly after Grace's death, probably as a way of coping, and continued until her own death 18 years later. Some parts had already been published by then, but most were drafts—often repetitious and lacking chronology—plastered with notes and archival material. Streamlining what was factually a “kind of scrapbook” in a “chaotic state” (7-8) presented a herculean task for Sorensen, the founder of the Abbott Sisters Project and editor of *The Grace Abbott Reader* (2015). Advised by the sisters' biographer Lela Costin, it took him 23 years to complete, an impressive feat he superbly executed thanks to his outstanding editing skills. In accordance with Abbott's wishes, the result is a popular rendition of Grace's life intended as a companion to Costin's more critical biography (9, 14). Sorensen admits, however, that by appealing to a broad readership, he aims to inspire contemporary social change along the lines of the sisters' ideas (2-4). Although Abbott modestly characterized her book as “part biography, part personal memoir, part documentary record” (5), her extensive inclusions of Grace's own words likewise unmistakably serve as a political manifesto and continued call to arms.
- 8 The red line that weaves the book together then is spotlighting Grace's work. This is a worthy goal in itself. Many new insights into the sisters' lives can be deduced, especially through previously undisclosed details and the ways in which Abbott conveyed their past to help shape how their legacy would be viewed in the present. She builds this story using a three-part structure that focuses respectively on their childhood and Grace's time at the Immigrants' Protective League and Children's Bureau. A fourth part, detailing her final years when she helped draft the Social Security Act, never materialized beyond an outline of chapter titles that is included in an appendix.
- 9 The first part, written in a style Sorensen called “as tender and fond as a children's book” (1), resembles a memoir the most. Indeed, it presents an endearing portrait of the sisters' childhood in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Nebraska that could easily compete with Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. Grace is introduced as a charmingly rebellious yet community-oriented girl who applied the debating skills she learned from her lawyer father to resist restrictions of any kind. For example, she once refused to wear a starched

dress by telling her grandmother she did “not want to be a proper child, I want to do things!” (88). Yet the idyllic picture of her Midwestern (white) family life is as political as it is amiable. Abbott depicts Grace as the embodiment of her family’s and region’s exemplary tradition of defiance, perseverance, and democracy. Through them, she not-so-subtly implies, one can understand America’s ‘true’ heart and rightful path forward. Her father, a Civil War veteran, was a “rugged individualist” driven by his belief in the “western promise” and “American tradition of pioneer life” that began with his Puritan ancestry (20, 22, 72). He emerges alternately as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Daniel Boone conquering the wilderness and a new Benjamin Franklin crafting modern America’s sociopolitical infrastructure as an attorney and senator. Her mother and grandmother, coming from a Quaker and abolitionist family tradition, equally stimulated Grace’s independence and civic duty. As early suffragettes, they instilled their “almost militant belief in women’s rights” (180) in the girls; Grace once even shared her bedroom with Susan B. Anthony. Their middle-class childhood—they went to college and had a maid—perhaps made them less representative of frontier girls at the time. Yet, Abbott insists, it was this upbringing, crafted in an enigmatic and now extinct “epoch of American life,” that informed Grace’s activism and made it quintessentially American (106-7).

- 10 Aborting her doctorate in political science, Grace moved to Chicago in 1908 for what became a 13-year tenure at Hull House, the legendary settlement house ran by Jane Addams. As a developing metropolis, Chicago burst with energy, but the influx of southern blacks during the Great Migration and immigrants fleeing war-torn Europe exacerbated its grinding social problems. However, in this second part, Abbott focuses less on Grace’s personal adjustment to these, undoubtedly bewildering, circumstances. Instead, she predominantly aims to justify and contextualize her activism, writing in a more documentary style complete with primary sources. She nonetheless vividly captures how Grace—as a true pioneer—mounted the challenges she encountered as head of the Immigrants’ Protective League, which she largely directed from Hull. She soon internalized the social philosophy of the Hull women, who combined conservative methods and serving local needs with advocating federal intervention as the fastest way to benefit the entire population (111). She for instance instigated experimental immigrant safety stations and fought against their exploitation by employment agencies and other institutions. Her trips to Europe solidified her pacifist and globalist outlook, while her work with the suffragettes and the Progressive Party furthered her interest in women’s and children’s well-being.
- 11 Relying increasingly on primary documents, the final and most political part details Grace’s transformation into “a crusader for America’s children” (222) from her move to Washington to head the Children’s Bureau until her death of cancer in 1939. Grace emerges as a visionary heroine who went above and beyond using “her simple democratic way” (265) to translate her views into lasting policies, including through radio chats and authoring sociological texts. Abbott foregrounds Grace’s efforts on behalf of the Maternity and Infancy Act and the 1916 Keating-Owen Act, the first federal child labor law. The passages chronicling how Grace stood up to President Hoover when he supported a politically motivated takeover of the Children’s Bureau present a highlight. Such feminist power displays support the book’s overall optimism, but Abbott’s more bitter tone in the final part betrays a deeper, more intriguing sense of the sisters’ experiences. Her occasional laments of the anti-socialist attacks Grace endured, their effects on Grace’s health, or of the futility of good work gone to waste due to ‘politics’

disclose only a small hint of the human cost of their work. Yet they offer the best means to appreciate the scope and significance of their endeavors.

- 12 Abbott's accessible style full of colorful details is highly engaging; especially the chapters on child labor and infant mortality present animated and at times moving reads. The memoir-format also allows more space for Grace's own words than academic studies on the sisters' work have so far. Above all, the book is a heartfelt tribute of one sister to another. Because Sorensen is also noticeably enamored by his subjects, the book brims with love. Yet overall it is less intimate than expected. Little attention is paid to character development and references to Grace's private life—she never married—are conspicuously absent. Abbott's emphasis on Grace's accomplishments rather than her emotions nonetheless speaks to her character and the prevailing notions of femininity that informed contemporary female behavior and the language used to describe it. As such, the book makes painfully clear how the sisters were bound by such notions, even in their rebellion against them.
- 13 Abbott's carefully chosen language also betrays how protective she was of Grace's image. Sorensen made the right call to omit critical footnotes to nuance her writing. However, a short list in his introductory chapter of critical questions to bear in mind when assessing Grace's story would have added to its depth. Abbott's memoir contributes, albeit implicitly, to several historiographical debates in social movement history and the existing literature on the Progressive Movement that are worth illuminating to academic and non-academic readers alike. For example, by highlighting these lesser-known female reformers, *A Sister's Memories* is not just a valuable addition to the many recent biographies of Progressive heroines like Addams or Kelley. It also invites broader questions on the generation of social change and the role leadership plays in social justice movements, particularly by women. Abbott and Sorensen delight in underscoring Grace's uniqueness and, facilitated by the memoir-format, largely leave untouched the many social groups that advocated similar or related goals, like labor and civil rights organizations. They thereby indirectly validate the use of charismatic leadership models to explain movement successes. Yet Abbott's emphasis on the impact of the women's movement across generations and Grace's mix of locally-based trial-and-error tactics with nationally-oriented legislative strategies tie in with top-down/bottom-up leadership discussions in predominantly civil rights studies and some on the Progressive Era, like William Reese's work (2002). Her disclosures on the nuts and bolts of Grace's efforts and her reliance on female-centered networks, underdeveloped in Costin's biography, additionally highlight the importance of resource mobilization for social change. The first part of Abbott's memoirs, written in 1939, will also benefit the new scholarship on frontier women and the West as well as intrigue scholars of 1930s culture, as it fits the decade's overall cultural tendency to retrieve a sense of American nationalism through the 'simpler' times of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- 14 To understand Grace Abbott best, the book must indeed be read alongside more academic works on the Progressive Era—such as those by Anthony Platt (1977, 2009), Michael McGerr (2003), Michael and Brett Friedman (2006), and Shelton Stormquist (2006)—and contemporary writings, particularly by immigrants themselves. These are needed to counteract the book's rather problematic imagery of immigrants as helpless and Progressives solely as a force for good, which is something Sorensen should also have addressed in his introduction. But perhaps in this kind of phrasing some hidden clues can be found regarding the extent of the sisters' radical propensity and how they thought

they could influence their environment within society's prevailing gender, race, and class structures.

- 15 *A Sister's Memories* skillfully illuminates the wide range of Progressive Era reforms and the creativity, diligence, and audacity with which women like the Abbotts met the challenge. It also serves as an apt instrument to measure degrees of (dis)continuity in American history and its cyclical nature of opportunities found and lost for meaningful social change. In the Trump era, the sisters' fiery defense of female empowerment, globalism, just immigration policies, and health care as a right has special meaning; even Grace's revulsion of politicians' deliberate reliance on false information to win power give the reader an eerie sense of reliving Groundhog Day. However, reading it in a partisan manner does injustice to Grace's lived experience as someone whose success was rooted in a complicated mixture of progressive and conservative traditions and to the complexity of how change is generated in practice. Today's left-leaning social activists will nonetheless find inspiration and strength in Grace's philosophy that "what was lost at one time would be got back at another time, if one only had courage and patience" (245).
- 16 Laura Visser-Maessen
- 17 author of "Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots"
- 18 <http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/13108.html>
- 19 Finalist for the Hooks Institute National Book Award 2016